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Lunching crowd, see how they spend

Chester Smolski

This year marks the 20th anniversary of an event that has had a marked impact on the shopping pattern of Rhode Island shoppers — Midland Mall, now Rhode Island Mall, opened its doors in Warwick.

That opening was to herald the beginning of a retailing experience that has grown with the construction of other malls and plazas that now completely surround the state's capital city. And it is a phenomenon which still continues, as two more malls in nearby Massachusetts prepare for construction.

The results of this new land use pattern of single-purpose centers ringing the core city is, of course, to draw this retailing activity from the Providence downtown. Today, the large department stores have disappeared from the central business district only to appear with different names at the malls where they are called anchor stores, and many smaller downtown shops have moved out to the malls or simply closed for lack of business.

After having scraped bottom, it now appears that there is new hope for retailing in the future of the Providence central business district. The \$120 million Foundry and \$300 million Providence Place, mixed-use developments of offices, hotels and retailing, plan to devote more square footage to retailing, combined, than is found at the Warwick Mall.

Questions have been raised about whether this is a market area large enough to support these retailing ventures, but developers of these two projects are positive, and plan to have them operational in the next several years.

But what of downtown retailing in the interim? Are merchants supposed to wait until the 1990s in the hope that something better might happen?

It must be remembered that Providence is still the second city for retailing in the state, after Warwick, with \$600 million in annual sales accounting for 14.4 percent of all state retail sales, according to the last federal census of retailing taken in 1982. With more than 10,000 Providence employees working in this sector, many in the downtown, it is incumbent upon present merchants to strengthen their position, if for no other reason than for the major human and financial investments already there.

Attracting shoppers into the downtown is a major and long-term problem that the Foundry and Providence Place will possibly solve, but right now there are more than 30,000 office employees working in the city center, many of whom are not being "captured" by retailers during the prime lunch time period.

One reason for this is that workers stay inside and lunch at their desks or at cafeterias provided by their places of employment. If these people were to leave their buildings to get lunch then they would have to walk by shops and perhaps buy goods. How to get these workers to leave their buildings is the question.

In London, many clerical and working staff are given luncheon vouchers to be used in the city center. Why not have downtown Providence firms do the same thing and give employees luncheon vouchers to be used only in the downtown? This would certainly be a major stimulus for the restaurant trade.

To further encourage workers into the downtown, new buildings should not provide cafeterias for

workers. For example, if the 300-seat cafeteria planned for the Citizens Bank to be built in the Capital Center were replaced with a voucher system, then scores of workers would use downtown restaurants and shops. The bank would benefit also by saving money on subsidized meals and by saving space in the building which could be rented.

One reason why downtown Norfolk, Virginia, is very quiet at lunch time is that a new federal building with hundreds of employees provided a cafeteria and a one-half hour lunch period. Few people leave the building for lunch, or to browse through the adjacent shops.

Last year's Carr, Lynch and Levine study for downtown Providence proposed a Providence Company, essentially a downtown management entity, to package ideas and practices, including retailing, for a more vibrant city center.

The city is moving to adopt some of the study recommendations but has limited its goals only to housing in the downtown, a concern of the mayor. This is a too narrow focus and shortchanges the retailing needs of the downtown.

Retailing in the downtown looks encouraging in the distant future, but in the short term, more aggressive efforts need to be made to capture an already existing market, whether with luncheon vouchers, longer lunch hours, constraints on cafeterias, or whatever.

Given the opportunity, a Providence company can provide the leadership to implement such practices if the core city is to compete for current retailing with surrounding shopping centers.

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